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New 'designer bugs' advanced by Soviets

By Tom Diaz
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The Soviet Union is using genetic engineering to create virulent new biological weapons that could be deployed by 1989, a classified report prepared for the National Security Council says.

"Genetic engineering" is the popular name for developing, through advanced biological techniques, organisms that do not occur in nature.

"It's like making designer drugs," Robert H. Kupperman, a chemical warfare expert at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies, said yesterday about the significance of the Soviet genetic engineering activity.

"You want to get some specific characteristic, some function," he said. "If it's just a question of killing people, there are plenty of biological agents already in existence that we couldn't defend against."

The secret report — a copy of which was recently obtained by The Washington Times — outlines extensive violations by the Soviets of two treaties. The report was prepared last year by Central Intelligence Agency and Arms Control and Disarmament Agency analysts.

The United States unilaterally renounced the use of biological weapons in 1969 and led the negotiation of the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), which forbids development, production or stockpiling of biological and toxin weapons. A 1925 pact, known as the Geneva Protocol, forbids the use in warfare of chemical or biological agents.

Violations of these pacts cited by the CIA include production by the Soviets of deadly trichothecene mycotoxins, known as "yellow rain." The mycotoxins, which cause ghastly deaths and suffering, were transferred to Soviet allies for use in Laos and Kampuchea, and have been directly used by Soviet military forces in Afghanistan since at least 1980, according to the report.

Although the United States has destroyed its stocks of biological weapons in accordance with the 1972 treaty, the CIA report says that the Soviet Union has forged ahead

with an enormous biological warfare program, boosting its offensive capability in that area along with its chemical warfare capability.

"The intelligence evidence indicates that the Soviets have maintained an offensive biological warfare program and capability

since signing the BWC," the report says.

As evidence, the report notes construction at confirmed and suspected biological weapons production sites.

"The continued construction at some of the suspect biological warfare research, production, and storage facilities ... the inadvertent release of anthrax in the 1979 accident at the Sverdlosk BW facility ... [and] the fact that mycotoxins have been widely used as warfare agents ... confirms the continued existence of a development, production and weaponization program or stockpiling of such agents explicitly prohibited by the [Biological Weapons] Convention."

According to the report, the Soviet program is located within the Ministry of Defense, under a "covert administrative and organization apparatus" known as the 7th Main Directorate.

That directorate is responsible for "all aspects of the [biological warfare] program, including research, development, testing, production and storage."

The report raises particular concern about the directorate's activities in developing "novel" biological weapons.

"We believe the Soviets are using recent advances in biotechnology, such as genetic engineering, to develop a new class of CBW [chemical, biological warfare] agents that can be rapidly produced for deployment," the report warns. "Some of the compounds developed under this program may now be available in sufficient quantities to permit extensive testing for their usefulness as field agents. Sufficient quantities for initial munitions testing and weaponization could become available within the next five years."

According to the report, the Soviets set up a special division of their

Microbiological Industry Organization between 1972 and 1976 to develop new CBW agents.

The facility is apparently located at Koltsovo, and includes "heavily guarded, militarily sponsored facilities for development and storage of small quantities of micro-organisms until needed for rapid, large-scale production of CBW agents."

Mr. Kupperman said there are a number of reasons why the Soviets might want to develop new biological agents, even though existing weapons are lethal enough.

"Their use is deniable," he said. "It takes only a few people to spread them around."

Other advantages include the ability to spread sickness or death widely over an area to debilitate whole populations — including military units — before their use can be detected.

"They are ideal terrorist weapons," Mr. Kupperman said.